Make Reward Recognition Work, Part 1

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Reward and Recognition is a difficult practice. It seems that the larger the organization is the more difficult the Reward and Recognition practice can be. It’s true that diversity is good, but diversity also makes it challenging to find ways to do or say something that is meaningful or appreciated by so many differing perspectives and ideals.

Even though effective Reward and Recognition is challenging, please don’t overlook its importance to affecting the changes that you want or need to drive because of that.

Without writing several pages of observations to prove a theory, I submit to the reader a simple axiom. A tried and true method of developing correct behavior and desired culture that is part of all of our mutual programming, regardless of age, background, language, or culture, is to reward that behavior we desire and to punish that behavior we do not want repeated.

Given that axiom, let’s look at how we can develop an effective reward methodology or system. One method or system is not right for all. In most cases, we must adjust our approach not just to suit our own organization, but also to suit an individual personality.

Human beings are complex in personality. Organizations of human beings are even more complex, hence the challenge. However, our complexities have many fundamental behaviors in common. Here are some examples:

1. We desire to be wanted or appreciated.
2. We don't like doing something for nothing.
3. We enjoy repeating positive experiences and avoid repeating negative ones.
4. Our decisions and, therefore, our behavior are affected as much or more by emotions and relationships than by logic or rules.
5. The more impactful the experience, the better we remember and the more we adjust.

That list is enough for us to work with to make an effective Reward and Recognition system. The list is rather short. That is not to say that Reward and Recognition is simple. The challenge is not in what to do, but in how to do it.

Here is a common and simple example of what I mean. Let's say that a team member has recently gone above and beyond the normal call of duty to accomplish an important outcome. We need to let this team member know that we have noticed and appreciate it what he has done; and we probably need to recognize that we don't necessarily expect that extraordinary effort every day.

How to effectively convey our appreciation can be the complicated part. Some people enjoy being recognized in front of all of their peers. Some find that embarrassing and would rather not. Some might appreciate lunch with the boss, while others might just assume not spend any unnecessary time in a leader's presence. Some might appreciate a simple handwritten letter, while others might find such a gesture trite. Figuring out the right method, the "how," is the hard part.

With that said, let me offer some observations about what makes effective Reward and Recognition to help trigger the process, then let me offer some thoughts and ideas for possible methods of delivery. Ultimately, you will need to determine what the best delivery is for the person or people to be rewarded.

On Effective Reward and Recognition

The best, most impactful means of driving desired behavior is also the subtlest and it requires the greatest attention. That is to catch someone in the act and to reinforce the behavior as soon as it occurs. It lets everyone present know that you are paying attention, that you appreciate the cooperation and courage the individual or team displayed and, if done appropriately, it imparts that positive emotional experience that people will desire to share, repeat, or get some of their own if they are merely observing.

The famous Pavlov proved the effectiveness of the immediate-response reward and recognition method. We obviously don't want to be so extreme, but we do want to make it our first-order strategy.

Many times we focus too much on the word "Reward" and not enough on the word "Recognition." Don't forget the second half of the phrase. The second part of our strategy should be to actively monitor metrics and progress for predetermined milestones and turning points. When individuals, teams, or the organization achieves an important step, make an impactful statement.

Think about it for a moment. If our leaders don't appear to care that we have accomplished, changed, or achieved a milestone, why should any of us? If we are using metrics and program plans appropriately then we are doing so to monitor progress. Celebrate progress when it is achieved. The closer the celebration is to the achievement, the more impact it has.

It is important to be prompt with Reward and Recognition. Consider this: if your family celebrated your birthday three months after it passed, would you feel important, or would you know that the celebration was just an obligatory ritual?

The last part of our strategy is to balance consistency with flexibility. I know the two words in the same phrase are a bit of an oxymoron. This gets toward the tough part. If we determine that something is worth recognizing, we should do so every time it occurs. However, we should be willing to adjust the recognition to suit the individuals or the teams, according to their personality.

For the large organizations where consistency is important, here is my best advice. Have a standard, consistent form of "public" recognition for the behavior or achievement. Make it meaningful and important to the general public audience, but not embarrassing for the individual. Then, make it that individual's, or team leader's responsibility to reward the achievement in a way that is personally meaningful.

I worked in one organization that conducted almost no reward or recognition. It struggled terribly to affect the sort of behavioral change it desired. However, when my leaders did even small things to recognize my efforts, they meant a great deal to me.

Contrarily, I worked for another organization that was very fond of Reward and Recognition. I have a pile (literal) of certificates and other awards for my accomplishments (recognition). I also received some significant rewards for jobs done well or outstanding performance. Ironically, the experiences that I recall best were the ones my peers or leaders made personal.

The lesson I take away from both experiences is this: The Reward and Recognition that sticks best is that which is delivered in a personal and meaningful way.

Let me sum up the strategy. Be "on-the-spot" with acknowledging the correct and desired behavior. Be prompt to announce achievements of milestones, changes, or accomplishments and show that it is important to you, to the organization, and make it important to everyone else. Be consistent about what is recognized and rewarded, but be personal in how the recognition or reward is imparted.

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